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RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 2021
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 9057
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 7295
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 5204
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 3450
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 5156
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0029
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0691
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 4267
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 9620
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 6914
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0003
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 3814
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INSB

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SUBJECT: SIGNIFICANT IDP RELEASES CONTINUE IN SRI LANKA

Classified By: AMBASSADOR Patricia A. Butenis. REASONS: 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Significant numbers of IDPs continue to be released from camps in Manik Farm and elsewhere. Exact figures differ on just how many have been released, depending on whether the source of the information is the UN or the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL). The bottom line is that in dramatic contrast to the very few releases that occurred in the months leading up to October, tens of thousands of IDPs have returned home or to host families in their home districts in the past several weeks. Challenges are now likely to emerge in the return areas, as local infrastructure, often badly damaged by years of conflict, will be taxed beyond its capacity. Demining and other security-related complications, often cited by the GSL as reasons not to release IDPs, may now actually become legitimate issues.

¶2. (SBU) Accurate accounting of the numbers of returns occurring has proven difficult, as there has been a shortage of information given from the GSL to the UN and other groups working to assist returns. Nevertheless, UNHCR and OCHA have been attempting to track these returns, according to which camps they are coming from and to which towns and districts they are returning. Their data is based on an original total of 280,938 IDPs displaced since April 2008. Of this number, 188,279 remained in camps on November 1. This figure is further broken down to show 176,508 IDPs in Vavuniya, of which 158,000 were in Manik Farm. 2,816 IDPs remained in camps in and around Jaffna, 1,989 in camps located in Mannar, and 6,966 in Trincomalee. In contrast to some of the releases which occurred in September, when IDPs were often required to remain in closed transit camps in their home districts for days and even weeks before actually being freed, UN officials reported anecdotally on November 2 that these recent returnees were spending two or three days in transit camps at most.

¶3. (SBU) Government numbers, given to Post by military commanders in Vavuniya, stated that 154,483 IDPs remained in camps as of November 4. Discrepancies in the UN and SLA figures could arise from differences in who was being counted

or which camps were or were not included. Post does not know whether UN accounting allows for the possibility of significant numbers of persons bribing their way out of the camps in preceding months. There have been unverified reports of as many as 10,000 to 50,000 persons escaping the camps by those means.

COMMENT

¶4. (C) The government appears to have made a decision a couple weeks ago that whatever the benefits were to keeping the IDPs in the camps, they increasingly were outweighed by the negatives. Accordingly, they abruptly changed course, releasing as many as possible, as quickly as possible. These releases likely will continue until the reasons the GSL cited previously for not releasing the IDPs -- demining, the need for reconstruction in home villages, and security issues -- become real challenges. At that point, the GSL may have to slow the returns process again and keep a certain number of persons in the camps for a longer period of time as they sort out the situation on the ground in the return destinations.

BUTENIS